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## “TENDENCIES” IN FICTION.

BY ANDREW LANG.

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IF we are trying to understand the “tendencies,” the main currents and back-waters of thought and sentiment, in any past age, we do not pay particular attention to its light literature. Plays and novels of the past give little of the grave information which we seek in old works of philosophy, history and theology. People used to keep their play and their earnest apart with some success. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Greek plays contain the most profound religious and philosophic reflections of the period, but if any one calls Greek plays light literature, we “disable his judgment.” And, even in this field, as time went on, and discussion abounded, and sophists multiplied, and theorists took aim at every conceivable object, we find Euripides filling his dramas with perfectly modern “tendencies.” Euripides revels in “problems,” as much as any lady novelist who writes under a masculine name takes pleasure in rare moral or immoral “situations.” For this very quality Aristophanes, like a good literary Tory, assails Euripides. His characters exhibit on the stage, before all Athens, positions which it would be wiser not to discuss at all. The drama becomes a debating room of matters better left undebated to the verdict of tradition. The passion of a brother for a sister is one of these risky situations, riskier than the modern British novelist is likely to attempt. But here was a “problem,” and Euripides was as fond of a “problem” as Dr. Ibsen.

These things are the exceptions. In all the plays of Shakespeare, in an age when the drama was to the world what the novel is to-day, how little we find of “tendencies.” The great contemporary “problem” was the sequel to the English Reformation. The British middle classes, like John Knox, who refused an Eng-

lish bishopric, conceived that the English Reformation had not gone nearly far enough. There were still plenty of "idols" to break ; plenty of beauty in religious ceremonial was left to destroy, numerous illogical formulæ were to be swept away. The Puritans, "a sect of perilous consequence," said Elizabeth, "such as would have no kings but a presbytery," were waxing great in the land. The attempt at a theocracy was maturing, but about all this we find, in Shakspeare, next to nothing. Sir Andrew Aguecheek, who did not give his "exquisite reason," declared his dislike of a Puritan,—in Illyria,—but of debates on Puritanism Shakspeare gives us none. His own shade of religious opinion is disputed to this day. The great early colonial efforts of his time are not more prominent in his works. The "problems" of Hamlet or of Jacques are the eternal, not the temporary or exceptional, problems of humanity.

As for tendencies in novels, till the middle of the eighteenth century, at earliest, novels were written merely for human pleasure. "Bold bawdry and open manslaughter," says Ascham, were their themes in the Elizabethan age. Love and fighting, to use more friendly and even more accurate language, were still the topics of fiction. Fielding and Richardson had their confessed moral and social purposes, especially Fielding ; but they subordinated these to the story and to the play of character. Sheer romance prevailed with Mrs. Radcliffe, Miss Porter, and the totally forgotten novelists of chivalry and mediæval history, whose fame, if they had any, was swallowed up in that of Scott. He, of course, was a romancer pure and simple ; so, in essentials, were Bulwer Lytton, and Cooper, and even Hawthorne, despite his allegory, for Hawthorne loved old moral ideas for their romantic possibilities. Yet even Disraeli, in *Sybil*, anticipated our modern tales about social problems, and M. Taine, not quite unjustly, censured the eternal moral purpose of Thackeray. *The Newcomes* is a long parable of loveless marriages, the theme is insisted on with tedious iteration. Dickens, too, sacrificed much to tendencies ; several of his tales are pamphlets directed at abuses, but then his are amusing pamphlets. We can endure plenty of purpose and plenty of preaching from novelists who are humorists. But, after the deaths of our great novelists, the novel, somehow, has become a more and more potent literary engine ; till, like Aaron's rod, it has swallowed up all the other

species of literature. When the public says “literature,” the public means novels,—and new novels. We can scarcely be said to have any new historians who are read as Macaulay was read, or as Mr. Froude, or Gibbon, or Carlyle were read. The public does not care for history; recently a novelist delivered a lecture in which Prince Charles was said to be the lover of Beatrice Esmond! Such novelist’s history is as accurate as Miss Aikin’s account of the Rising of 1715, begun, according to her, in the interests of a king who was dead, and led by a prince who was not born. In philosophy Mr. Herbert Spencer has shot his bolt, or rather, has emptied his quiver, and Darwin is lost in the Darwinians. We have, indeed, Biblical critics, or we borrow them from Germany. But History, Philosophy, Theology, are not now read as our fathers read them, in works of Theology, Philosophy, and History. These branches of literature now exist merely as “stock,”—in the culinary sense,—for novels. In I forget what South Sea isle, the women chew a certain root, and the liquid thus extracted is the beverage of the men. So modern novelists, reading grave works, or reading articles about them, produce the novel of philosophy, of theology, of “tendency” and “problem” for the pensive, but indolent public. History itself reaches the world in historical novels. Miss Pardoe’s works on the French Court, and Mr. Parkman’s excellent book on the Jesuits in Canada, are “stock” for Dr. Doyle’s *Refugees*, and I fear that no more of Mr. Parkman’s labors really reaches the English public. Every matter of discussion, however esoteric,—the relations of the sexes, the foundations of belief, the distribution of wealth,—is mixed up with “a smooth love tale,” and thus the cup of learning, as Lucretius recommends, has honey smeared on its lips, and is drained by the thirsty soul. I prefer my jam and my powder separate, for one, and, if I want to know about Lourdes, turn rather to French physiologists and psychologists, than to the novel of M. Zola. But this is not the general taste, with which it were vain to quarrel. Interested in many grave and in some repulsive matters, the public declines to study these themes in the treatises of specialists, and devours them when they are sandwiched between layers of fiction.

This taste is in itself a “tendency” worth noting, and necessarily the novels of an age like ours are replete with tendencies. We are humanitarian, and so are our novels; revolutionary, and

so are our novels. All institutions are brewing in a witch's cauldron, wherein the novelist drives his hook, like the sons of Eli, and brings forth matters good or bad.

Women, naturally, take the lead in an industry to which their desultory and amateur education conducts them. I am not speaking, of course, about the accomplished author of *David Grieve*, whose education and knowledge are thorough and manly, and who does not make hysterics her favorite *motif*. But hysterics really seem to be the chief literary motive of some strangely popular lady authors. The tendency represented in their novels is the revolt of some women against the Nature of Things, and especially against the nature of their sex. They want to have all the freedom which men exercise, even that which they exercise contrary to the acknowledged laws of Christian morals. Licentiousness, the claim "to enjoy," as lady novelists call it, at random, is bad enough in men, but in men it does not cause a break up of the family, and a reduction of society to something much below the state of the Digger Indians. For women "to enjoy," that is, to behave like the nymphs of Otaheite in the *Antijacobin*, is, manifestly, to leave the new generation in the posture of young cuckoos bereft even of the comforts of a thrush's or a sparrow's nest. This obvious fact in natural history has always been regarded as a bar to the indiscriminate license of women. Horace condoles with them ; *miserarum est neque amori dare ludum*, and so forth ; but some of the hysterical ladies maintain their assertion of feminine equality in these matters. Though their works make a talk, and are devoured as stolen fruit, it is not likely that this particular "tendency" will do much harm. "Offences must needs come," but scandals about girls are not, perhaps, so numerous now as they have been in several other less earnest periods. Women are, on the whole, naturally averse to following the path pointed out by the more daring romancers of their sex. Again, the exceptions who want to "live up," or rather down, to their favorite novels are usually unattractive, and therefore, by the selfishness of wicked man, are condemned to theory.

Quite another kind of freedom, and of equality with mankind, is claimed and acted on by two recent English heroines. Each of these young ladies knocks down her old aunt ! One of them explains that, while she deeply regrets her impulsive conduct, *men* have the privilege of expressing passion in *voies de fait*, as

the French have it. So why not women? Well, one might put it to the *Superfluous Woman* that men do not knock down their aunts, nor even their uncles. Give woman an inch, and she will take an ell, in the matter of liberty and privilege. This *Superfluous Woman* perhaps represents the high water mark of hysterics in female fiction. The heroine, a pretty and wealthy girl, is dying of *ennui* before she is twenty-one, if my chronology is correct. Girls of twenty, with beauty on their side, and triumph before them, do not sicken of *ennui*. “They have a bully time.” In a few seasons matters alter; the vanity and vulgarity, the tedium and desolation of ceaseless pleasure hunting begin to tell, begin to be felt. The dose of “excitement” has to be increased, fiercer and stronger ingredients are added, and the girl ends in a Sisterhood, in a loveless marriage with the usual results, as a public character and topic of tattle, or, more commonly, as a weary, wandering old maid. But girls of twenty are not *blasées* to death, and, like the Sirens in Pontus de Tyard, *ennuyées jusques a desespoir*. In a recent tale, *The Maiden’s Progress*, Miss Hunt has drawn, with much cleverness, the slow progress of *ennui* in the flirting spinster. But she is good natured, and lets her heroine easily off at the end. Generations of girls have I seen, gathering roses while they might, and then gathering nettles and thistles, seen them with pleasure, and soon with pity; watched their weariness and forced feverish gaiety. But a pretty girl bored to death at twenty saw I never.

The *Superfluous Woman* takes to a hectic kind of philanthropy: flies to the North, falls in love with a Caledonian farmer who is great at putting the stone, has an erotic and not very intelligible scene with him in a barn, finds him very unlike Robbie Burns in any similar situation, hurries South, knocks down her old aunt, marries an idiot peer, bears superfluous idiots, is haunted by a “Thing” with claws, and so forth, and so forth. This novel then seems to be a sea-wrack left at the highwater mark of hysteria. The book has been a good deal tattled about in print: it represents a “tendency”—the tendency to hysterics—and, as for the heroine, she wanted the attentions of Dr. Playfair or of Dr. Weir Mitchell, or she needed to be married at seventeen. “The green sickness” was very familiar to our ancestors, but they did not write novels about it.

It is not my opinion that the author of this eccentric romance

wants to do harm ; very far from it ; she plainly regards herself as a moralist. Indeed they all do ; all are very earnest ladies, including, doubtless, the author of *The Heavenly Twins*. But I have never been able to read that work, and have only met one of my own sex who had done so. Some, indeed, I have seen driven to this water by their lady wives, but they did not drink ; they could not drink. Thus, as the ladies will not tell me the plot, and men cannot, I am unable to pronounce an opinion about the "tendencies" of *The Heavenly Twins*. *The Yellow Aster*, on the other hand, I have read some of, laying the book down where the heroine, who married out of curiosity, was so shocked by the usual "consequents of that manoeuvre," as the elder Mr. Weller says. The heroine was pleasant as Boadicea, painted blue, in childhood. Her agnostic parents I seem to have met somewhere before, in fiction. The character of the heroine is beyond me, but, if she is as rare as a Yellow Aster, it is of no importance. Long may girls like her be *introuvables*. The writer, unlike most of her peers, is not wholly destitute of humor.

*Minora canamus.* I have read a good deal of *Dodo*, and also the remarks on *Dodo*, published in an American journal, by "T. W. H." Am I wrong in conjecturing that Colonel Higginson is the critic ? At all events T. W. H. draws a parallel between *Dodo* and Daisy Miller as exhibiting "the feminine low water-mark of the two nations." I congratulate you, if Daisy is your low water-mark, for I am, and have long been, in love with that pretty and amiable enchantress. She had a foolish vulgar mother, and no breeding, but *enfin*, Daisy is Daisy, and we all adore her. She did not die ; Mr. Henry James resuscitated her in the play which he wrote about her. *Dodo*, on the other hand, is a detestable minx, and her eternal patter has no wit to recommend it. If *Dodo* is our low water-mark, and if Daisy is yours, we are lost indeed. But, if *French* novelists are right, you have a water-mark much lower than Daisy ; and if some of your own novelists are right, I prefer your low water-mark to your high. Nay, surely there are worse lasses in America than pretty, innocent, pathetic Daisy. You are mortal, after all.

But there are other considerations. Such a yell was raised against Mr. James for his little masterpiece, that only very unusual courage would enable an American novelist to draw American woman at a lower water-mark. We, here, say what we please

Thackeray could draw Blanche Amory and Becky, without being called a bad Englishman. You know what happened to Mr. Henry James, when he sketched an American girl, not bad (as some think Becky was), not a petty minx, as Blanche was, but *mal élevée*. Mr. James was said to have libelled his countrywomen, or a class of his countrywomen. That was his crime. Now, pray observe, Dodo is not supposed by T. W. H. to represent English women, nor even a class of English women. In England we never dreamed of thinking that Dodo represented a class. On the other hand, the author of the novel was said, no doubt hastily, to have sketched a living person. To have done so would have been to commit an outrage. T. W. H. speaks of "the supposed original" and mentions that "she was recently married." If all this were true, Dodo would, of course, be not a type, but a real person; no class of English women would be represented by her. As a matter of fact, the author of *Dodo* did not even know in the most casual manner, the person to whom T. W. H. obviously refers. Again, the crime of Dodo, is, in my opinion, that she is a chattering bore. But T. W. H. complains of her guilt in "neglecting a too loyal husband," in leaving her child to dance with an old lover, and in dancing skirt dances, as it were, on the grave of the babe. Well, if the "original" was married *after* the publication of the novel (as T. W. H. says), obviously the fancied original cannot have been guilty of the excesses which T. W. H. so justly reprobates. But it is all of no importance. Dodo, if we accept all this gossip, is not a type of English woman, but is an individual. Daisy, on the showing of Mr. James's enemies, represented a class. The Dodo is an extinct bird; or was copied from *la belle Stuart*, in Grammont. The only "tendency" worth noticing, is the very general tendency to detect personal caricature in fiction. "Society" novels, bad at best, are apt to sin in such caricatures, drawn by dull people who do not even know the originals. Moreover, even if there were a real Dodo, she could not become the founder of a sect. *Ne faict ce tour qui veult.*

And now shall we discuss *Les Demi Vierges*? No, because the society, the bad society, is that of cosmopolitan Paris. We are not responsible for the vagaries of that international chaos.

Happily there are other "tendencies" than those of frivolity, fashion, bad taste, vice, sham social science, sciolistic theology,



and hysterics. There is the good old tendency to love a plain tale of adventure, of honest loves, and fair fighting. We have Gentlemen of France, we have knob-nosed Kaffirs and battles with sacred crocodiles, we have *The Prisoner of Zenda*, that pleasingly incredible scion of German royalty, we have *Micah Clarke*, and *The White Company*, and Mr. Stevenson's Highlanders and Lowlanders. Here is primitive fiction: here is what men and boys have always read for the sheer delight of the fancy. The heroines are stainless and fair, the men are brave and loyal, the villains come to a bad end, and all this is frankly popular. We have no Scott, we have no Dickens, we have no Fielding, but we have honest, upright romancers, who make us forget our problems and the questions that are so much with us, in the air of moor and heath, on the highway, on the battlefield, in the deadly breach. Our novels in this kind are not works of immortal genius: only five or six novelists are immortal. But the honest human nature that they deal with, the wholesome human need of recreation to which they appeal,—these are immortal and universal.

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